

PREFACE

Ben Sira is a difficult author. First of all, because any work of antiquity poses problems of comprehension in the measure that our century is distant and different from that of the ancients. Furthermore, the text of the Wisdom of Ben Sira was badly transmitted: its transmission is incomplete and uncritical in Hebrew and there are two forms in Greek, one short and the other long. In addition to that, a wisdom writing always has something of an enigma. In the case of Ben Sira that is all more true since the modern readers have paid scarce attention to him. These considerations, therefore, urge us to study the work of Ben Sira in its own right, without too much concern for influences that the author might have undergone. To familiarize with and to place oneself, so to speak, in the Wisdom of Ben Sira is a first requirement and this plunge into the deep leads to surprising discoveries.

Ben Sira is the only wisdom author of Ancient Israel whose name is known to us. He is also the only one who spoke of himself. How does he present himself? In order to gain insight in this, there is no other way than to study the autobiographical passages of his work, with a critical eye, given the condition of the text.¹ And for that matter, more than any other Biblical author Ben Sira has reflected on the mystery of time. How does he perceive it?

In order to understand more clearly these two literary facts, the most efficient way is actually to take a sufficiently long passage that can shed light on the arguments of the entire book. Sir 39,12-35 is a text that possesses precisely these qualities. After the text has been critically established as well as possible, it is necessary in order to grasp the real tenor of the minor details of the text, to observe all that corresponds to it in the rest of the book. In particular, the description of the wise scribe, that immediately precedes the chosen text, will receive a privileged treatment. Such is the plan of this

¹Cf. already J. Liesen, "First-Person Passages in the Book of Ben Sira", *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association*, 20 (1997) 24-47; "Strategical Self-References in Ben Sira", *Treasures of Wisdom. Studies in Ben Sira and the Book of Wisdom*. (BETL 143; Leuven 1999) 63-74.

book for which Jan Liesen did me the honour of asking to write a preface.

With an acute critical sense J.Liesen shows an astounding capacity to enter into the world of Ben Sira. The connections that he brings to light, between the sage and Wisdom, and between the wisdom teacher and his disciple, are very rich. His investigation advances considerably our understanding of the sapiential environment of Ancient Israel. The message that has come to light in this way has not lost all pertinence for our generation.

With regard to the body of the hymn: the 'work of God', even more than all his (created) works, is an invitation addressed to the disciple so that this person in his own time may discern and make it possible that divine magnificence reveals itself towards human beings as indulgent and merciful.

All the analyses in this book require great attention, and anyone who sets himself to do this will discover how much Ben Sira deserves his title of sage. The study of J.Liesen will not be without an impact on modern exegesis, which is more and more attentive to the work of the teacher from Jerusalem.

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